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ABSTRACT

In English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes at the college level, students are often enrolled who have a high degree of oral fluency, but little proficiency in reading or writing. Developmental ESL students need a solid start toward "inventing" themselves as readers and writers. One method of teaching ESL students to write is to build on their level of oral fluency. Situations can be created in the classroom where students collaborate as partners by sharing their personal histories aloud. After students have discussed their broadly focused personal histories, they narrow the focus to one specific aspect (e.g., a childhood memory). Students are encouraged to take notes during the talking and listening phase of their work. This helps them make the transition from the oral to the written phase of their work, and enables students to understand how texts are created on the basis of personal significance. Writers narrow and organize their material on the basis of what is significant to them. Likewise, readers/listeners focus on areas they find to be significant. Within this approach, students begin to make connections between writing and reading that they did not make before. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Talking Adult ESL Students into Writing:
Building on Oral Fluency to Promote Literacy

ERIC Digest. Prepared by Linda Blanton

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Digest

*Talking Adult ESL Students into Writing:
Building on Oral Fluency to Promote Literacy*Prepared by Linda Blanton
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In English as a second language (ESL) classes at the college level, students are often enrolled who have a high degree of oral fluency but little proficiency in reading and writing. College-level ESL curricula, largely designed on a postliteracy model, seem inadequate to serve students who need to learn English and develop advanced reading and writing skills at the same time. The challenge, then, is to reorient the college-level ESL curriculum to serve students with disparate and uneven proficiencies in oral and written English.

Which ESL Students Have Special Literacy Needs?

By and large, adults with special literacy needs in college-level classes are immigrants and refugees whose prior schooling has been disrupted for months or even years due to political and economic turmoil in their own countries. The schooling that they did have may not have been sufficient for them to handle subject-matter course work in English.

With no chance to establish a strong academic base in their own languages and with a weak academic beginning in English, these students often simply cope by acquiring what Cummins (1979, 1981) calls Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)--the verbal fluency in English needed for everyday informal situations. By transferring to English the decoding skills they acquired in their own languages before their schooling was interrupted, they appear literate. Yet their literacy is unfortunately very limited, for their schooling in any language was not sustained long enough for them to develop the deep literacy that can evolve only from sustained interaction with written texts.

When they arrive at college, many students are surprised that they are asked to take ESL placement tests. They are further surprised when they get their test results and realize that they have to enroll in intensive ESL classes. It is almost always students' reading and writing scores, not their listening comprehension scores, that place them in intensive ESL. Not having planned to spend a semester or two in intensive English classes before beginning their "real" studies, the students begin the school year disheartened. Raising their spirits while increasing their awareness of their needs becomes part of the ESL teacher's challenge (Blanton, 1987).

By and large, ESL curricula at post-secondary institutions are not designed to serve these students. While most ESL teachers at the college level see their job as teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP), students in their classes often have developmental needs, in addition to English-language needs. An EAP curriculum presupposes solid literacy abilities, as well as an academic orientation. It builds on students' awareness that there is a particular language of the academy (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986), certain ways of talking, reading, and writing about ideas and texts. Developmental ESL students, however,

are often not ready for such a curriculum; they do not have the developed literacy base that it presupposes.

How Do Developmental ESL Students Approach Literacy Tasks?

Adult ESL students with developmental literacy needs share a number of characteristics with native-English-speaking basic writers who are placed in remedial college English courses because they, too, have not become proficient enough in reading and writing to be placed into credit-bearing English courses. (See Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Salvatori, 1983; 1986.)

First, developmental ESL students often say that they do not like to read and do not read for pleasure. Second, they tend to respond to texts as nonreaders. For them, reading is a passive activity, and everything that can be said about a text lies in its print. They tend not to know that they can, and in fact should, bring their own reflections to bear on the subject matter. Reading for them involves the retrieval of information, of words. Questions they are asked about a text send them scurrying to that text to find the words to quote or copy in response to the question. They have limited experience with accessing their own ideas or responding to someone else's, and they often have little to write about, or little to say related to the subject of the text.

As Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986) put it, students who come to the college or university from outside the academic framework, those who do not see themselves as readers and writers, have to "invent" themselves as readers and writers. They have to invent the act of reading and writing by "assembling a language to make a reader [and a writer] and a reading [and a writing] possible, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention . . ." (p. 8).

Where Does the Teacher Start With Developmental ESL Students?

Developmental ESL students need a solid start toward inventing themselves as readers and writers. This includes the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency or CALP (Cummins, 1979, 1981)--the linguistic and intellectual operations, and forms and details of language expected of "good" students. Since developmental ESL students often come to college programs with a high degree of verbal fluency but little proficiency in reading and writing, it makes sense to start with what they bring with them--their oral fluency.

Personal histories offer a good point of departure because they belong to students. With their personal histories, students can assume a stance of authority over something that they, and only they, have knowledge of.

In order for students to understand that ideas and reflections are intended for exchange and that one person's ideas and

reflections can amplify someone else's, situations can be set up in the classroom where students collaborate with each other as partners to share their histories aloud (Blanton, 1988). As they listen to each other, they become conscious of differences and similarities between their own histories and those of their partners. This awareness is reinforced later, when students work with written texts, and a text and its author become their "partner."

After students have discussed their broadly focused personal histories, they narrow the focus to some particular facet--a childhood memory, a frightening experience, a family member. The point is for them to understand how texts are created on the basis of personal significance. Writers narrow and organize their material on the basis of what is significant to them. Likewise, listeners/readers focus on areas they find to be significant.

The concept of significance is extremely important in working with developmental ESL students. They need to participate in activities that help them understand that the process of assigning significance resides with *them*, as listeners, speakers, readers, and writers. When they read, developmental ESL students need to understand that it is their own reflections that cause them to consider something significant or insignificant. Failing to understand that or lacking the confidence to act on it, they rely on the author's words to tell them. Reading is then a frustrating experience because they cannot remember all of the author's words; no one can. During oral-aural work in class, students can be made aware of the notion of significance and the importance of relating texts to their own lives. They are then more likely to find significance in written texts when they read them.

Students can then make the natural transition from reading to writing about a personal experience--a childhood memory, a frightening nightmare. Encouraging students to take notes during the talking and listening phase of their work, ostensibly for the purpose of remembering, as listeners, what they might want to ask more about later, helps ease the transition as well.

Just as the topic limits and shapes what students include in their writing, the medium of writing also limits and shapes what they write. They begin to see this as they compare what they talk about with what they choose to put on paper. They begin to reflect on what Salvatori (1986) characterizes as the "distance that the act of writing imposes on life" (p. 143)--how their experience feels different from how it looks on paper. They can begin then to interact with their own texts in preparation for later interacting with the texts of others.

Students can then work again with their partners, those with whom they had the oral-aural exchange, and function as each other's editors. As they already know the personal history in its oral form, they can now talk about what appears in the written text, what has been left out, and whether or not there are discrepancies between the oral and written histories. Revisions follow, as writers adjust what they write to what they know.

When the writing is ready, it forms a pool of texts for the class to read. Twenty texts or so are passed around the room, and students are encouraged to exchange ideas or comments with the writers themselves. Gradually, they begin to respond to these texts. Something "rings a bell," or reminds them of something else, or makes them think of something that someone else has said, in class discussions or in another text. These texts eventually wind up in individual student folders. The folders become thicker as the semester progresses, and the cycle of talking, listening, writing, and reading repeats itself again and again. At times, whole folders are passed from reader to reader.

Conclusion

Within this approach, students begin to make connections between writing and reading that they did not make before. They begin to realize that real live people compose texts, whether they be classmates, themselves, or unknown writers. As readers, they can argue with those texts, decide what is significant about them, and take their meanings with them.

As the semester progresses, more and more published, non-student-produced texts can be included among the readings, and students become less awed by them, less reticent to respond to them, and more willing to weave their own texts and the texts of others into their writing. Gradually, a growing posture of authority develops, a belief that students' own ideas carry equal weight with those of "real" authors. They begin to see themselves as real readers and writers.

This is where teachers need to start with developmental ESL students. Not with grammar correction, not with academic assignments, not with workbook exercises, but with the students--who they are, what they have, and what they need to do in order to relate to the world of texts, and, hence, to function in academia. This is where they can develop the deep base of literacy on which all other academic work rests.

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